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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the relevance and usefulness of inservice teacher training courses once the teacher returned to the classroom. Subjects were 207 participants in a course for secondary school teachers of English as a Second Language in Hong Kong. The course has two emphases: language proficiency improvement and curriculum development. Subjects were surveyed at course's end on such aspects as overall course usefulness, relevance of individual course components, balance in time for different components, and balance in modes of learning. They were surveyed again 6 months later concerning overall course usefulness to daily work, extent to which course aims and objectives could help participants in their work, course aspects considered most useful, and changes in teaching resulting from participation. Analysis of the results indicates that (1) the course aspects perceived as useful are those with direct relevance to teachers' work after returning to school, (2) school-based work is an indispensable component to teacher education courses that aim at sustaining professional development after course completion, and (3) ideas most likely to be implemented in the classroom are those lending themselves most easily continuation and adaptation after the course, catering to students' needs, and helping teachers put theory into practice. (MSE)

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How sustainable are in-service teacher training courses?

ED 398 725

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RATIONALE

A lot of attention is given to ongoing formative and/or end-of-course summative evaluations that take place during a course. Course providers are keen to obtain feedback from the participants about their life during the course.

But what about life ***after*** the course? (Alderson 1985). Some may argue that if the participants do not see any life after the course they have attended, it may well be the case that they simply fail to see the relevance of the ideas gained from the course. And there is really not much that the course providers can do.

Life after the course, however, is particularly pertinent to the case of in-service teacher education which aims to effect changes in the participants' teaching on return to school. The nature of such courses predominantly aims towards application and implementation in the teacher's school environment. This justifies that follow-up evaluations of these courses are, as important as, if not more important than, any end-of-course evaluations (c.f. Alderson 1985 & Henderson 1991).

In fact, sustainable professional development after ELT teacher education projects has become of increasing interest during the last few years (Hendersan 1991). It would therefore be interesting to see if the course that the participants have attended can satisfy their needs on return to school and to see if the participants who return to school can implement ideas gaind from the course, and if not, why not.

BACKGROUND

The 4 inservice courses for teachers and panel chairspersons of English in secondary schools chosen for the present study are run by the Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIEd). The course for secondary teachers of English has two modules: the language improvement module and the English curriculum improvement module. The former aims at providing the participants with opportunities to improve their own language proficiency. The latter aims at further enhancing the participants' abilities to teach the subject effectively.

The course for panel chairpersons of English is much shorter and more intensive than the course for teachers of English and had only one module i.e. the ELT methodology module. A distinctive feature of the course is its Departmental Management Unit which is tailor made to suit their needs as panel chairpersons.

AIMS

This study addressed the issue of follow-up evaluation, and reported on the attempts to conduct follow-up studies of four courses. The research aimed at finding out:

A. if contents of the in-service teacher education courses were of any relevance or use to participants six months after they had returned to school;

B. if there were changes in the participants' teaching on return to school as a result of the courses they had attended since their return to school.

METHODOLOGY

1. End-of-course evaluation

An end-of-course evaluation questionnaire was given to the 207 participants on the four courses to fill in at time point 1 (T1). The objective of the questionnaire was to find out the participants' comments on the general aspects of the course ie. overall usefulness, relevance of individual course components, balance in time for different components, balance in modes of learning, etc.

2. Follow-up evaluation

A different post-course questionnaire was sent to the 207 participants approximately six months after the course at time point 2 (T2). The aim of the questionnaire was to find out:

A. the overall usefulness of the course to the participants' work;
B. the extent to which the course aims and objectives could help participants in their work;
C. aspects of the course which were considered to be most useful in their work;
D. changes in the participants' teaching, if any, as a result of the course they attended.

3. Post-course reporting-back sessions

Towards the end of the course, participants on the two courses for teachers of English had to commit themselves in writing to ideas which they intended to implement once they got back to school. A date was set, approximately 6 months after the course, on which participants had to come back to the institute to report back to their group tutor on the progress of their implementation plan.

FINDINGS

I. Overall Usefulness and Relevance of the Course

All the 207 participants rated (on a five-point scale) the overall usefulness both at the end of the course they attended (T1) and 6 months after (T2). 69.2% and 66.1% of the participants felt that the course they attended was useful and relevant to them at T1 and T2 respectively. At T2, more teachers (73.7%) than panel chairpersons of English (58.5%) found the course useful to their work (Appendice 1).

II. The Relevance of the Course Aims and Objectives

An average of 80.4% of the participants on the four courses considered course aims and objectives to be useful in their work on return to school. The following three (in order of relevance) were particularly well received (appendice 2):

Reflective teaching (95.3%);
Teaching approaches and techniques (91.5%);
Classroom observation and improvemnts (88.9%);
Departmental management (88.0%).

III. Usefulness and Relevance of Individual Course Components

Course components which were considered useful and relevant at T2 by the majority of the participants' (ie. over 70%) were :

Departmental Management (average: 78%)
Language Improvement (average: 77.7%)
Learning Through Language (average: 74.7%)

Promoting Learner Independence

Coping With Mixed Ability Classess

ELT Approaches

Task-based Learning

Classroom Interaction

School-based Work (average: 71.1%)

Course components which were perceived very differently at time points 1 & 2 are as follows:

Language Improvement (63.4% at T1 ; 77.7% at T2)

Reflection on present practice (53.3% at T1; 67.4 % at T2) (appendice 3)

IV. Changes in the participants' teaching as a result of the courses they had attended

(Listed in order of frequency of occurrence)

Showing more concern for students' needs

Improving teaching strategies

Improving the management of the English Department

Improving students' oral skills, including discussion skills

Adopting a more communicative teaching approach

Engineering more classroom interaction

Becoming a reflective teacher

Sharing ideas or insights gained from the course at panel meetings

Helping students to become more confident

Improving the teaching of grammar

(appendice 4)

Discussion of Results

I. Overall Usefulness and Relevance of the Course

As a whole, the majority of the teachers (66.1%) felt that the course they attended was useful to their work six months after they had returned to school. That should indicate, to a certain extent, that there was life after the course.

Panel chairpersons of English are in general much more experienced than teachers of English. Their additional role of administrative nature may also account for their higher expectations and demands of the course than those of teachers of English. On return to school, therefore, panel chairpersons did not find the course as useful and relevant as the other course for teachers of English.

II. Relevance of the Course Aims and Objectives

It is encouraging to find that most of the teachers (80.4%) considered the course aims and objectives very useful in their work. There is a strong case to argue that there was life after the course.

The course aim that was perceived to be most relevant to the teachers' work was reflective teaching (95.3%). The course aimed at guiding the participants to adopt a reflective stance in their own teaching. They were also given opportunities to write reflective journals every week while they were on course. The fact that teachers found this most relevant to their work further supports the idea that attending inservice course is a good chance for teachers to

refresh themselves, to sit back and to think of their own teaching practice, which they are not able to do so when they teach.

The next three aims and objectives that were thought to be very relevant to teachers' work are related to the practical side of teaching. These aims and objectives were: "to extend the repertoire of teaching approaches and techniques" (91.5%), "to provide teachers with opportunities to observe and evaluate classroom procedures" (88.9%) and "to manage an English Department" (88.0%). Other aims and objectives were related to the understanding of language learning theories, to curriculum planning and to the improvement of their language proficiency. Teachers probably did not find it so easy to apply these "theories" into practice and hence regarded these aims and objectives not so relevant to their work.

III. Usefulness and Relevance of Individual Course Components

78% of the participants on the course for panel chairpersons of English (ESP) considered Departmental Management unit the most useful content area whereas 77.7% of the participants on the course for teachers of English (ES) found the language improvement unit most relevant to their work.

The Departmental Management unit was tailored to enable panel chairpersons of English to better manage the English Department at secondary level. With llittle knowledge of management when they first joined the course, they invariably found this unit most relevant to their role as coordinator and administrator on return to school.

While participants on the ES course were still on the course, they did not seem to find the language improvement module that aimed to help them improve their English very useful (63.4% at T1). One reason could be because of the insufficient time allocated to self access language work as reflected in their end-of-course evaluation questionnaire. But on return to school, their attitude s eemed to have become more positive (77.7% at T2). As practising teachers of English, they saw and experienced the benefits of high language proficiency.

An average of 74.7% found Learning Through Language unit useful. I would think that it was because of the practical nature of this area. This area dealt with problems like teaching mixed ability classes, developing self access learning in secondary school, adopting task-based learning, using classroom language etc.

A considerable proportion of course time was devoted to school-based work. The whole idea was to give participants opportunities to study an area/ issue of interest to them, to try out some teaching ideas in the classroom and to evaluate the success of the implementation in order to make further improvements to teaching while they were on the course. Because of the practical nature of this content area, it was very well received.

IV. Changes in the participants' teaching as a result of the courses they had attended

Almost without exception, all changes were related to the practical side of teaching i.e. "showing more concern for students' needs" , "improving teaching strategies", "improving students' oral skills, including discussion skills", "adopting a more communicative teaching approach", etc. Most of the teachers who were able to implement these teaching ideas were not panel chairpersons, who were only able to "improve the management of the English

Department". In other words, panel chairpersons were able to implement only ideas that were particularly pertinent to their role as coordinator and administrator of the English Department.

In the questionnaire, there was a section that asked the panel chairpersons to point out any problems that they had met since attending the course. A number of problems were outlined; time management and heavy workloads were the two major ones. This may explain why they were not so able to put theories gained from the course into practice.

On the contrary, the English language teachers did not mention any major problems in their follow up questionnaire. They, however, did have to go back to the Institute to attend an interview session with their group tutor. During the interview, they reported on how well they managed to implement ideas which they committed to trying out in the action plan they drew up at the end of the course. I have classified reasons why participants were able to implement ideas when they returned school into the folllowing 5 categories:

1. CONTINUATION OF THE WORK DONE ON THE COURSE

   Teachers who began some work on the course but did not have enough time to try out everything would most likely continue to implement teaching ideas on return to school.

2. IMPROVEMENT ON WORK DONE ON THE COURSE

   Teachers who had tried out some teaching ideas while they were on the course but did not feel satisfied with the outcome of the try-out would most likely improve on and implement those teaching ideas.

3. ADAPTATIONS OF TEACHING IDEAS GAINED FROM THE COURSE TO SUIT THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM

Teachers who were sensitive to the needs of the students would most likely adapt and implement ideas gained from the course.

4. PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE

Teachers who were keen to put theory into practice were most likely to be those who implemented changes to their teaching on return to school.

CONCLUSION

A few interesting points about course design could be made at this stage:

1. Aspects of the course contents perceived by teachers as useful are those that have direct relevance to the teachers' work on return to school.
2. School-based work seems to be an indispensable component to any teacher education courses that aim sustaining professional development after the course.
3. Teaching ideas that teachers will most likely implement on return to school are from those aspects of course work that can lend themselves easily to continuation after the course, to further improvement, to adaptation after the course, to catering to students' needs and to helping teachers put theory into practice.

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Appendice 1

I. Overall Usefulness and Relevance of the Course

Course	ES942	ESP94A	ES951	ESP95A
T1	43.8%	69.3%	80.8%	83.0%
T2	71.4%	62.0%	76.0%	55.0%

On an average, 66.1% of the participants felt that the courses were useful and relevant to them six months after the courses (T2).

Appendice 2

II. Relevance of the Course Aims and Objectives

Percentages of participants who felt that aims and objectives of the course they attended were able to help them in their work are as follows:

	ES942	ESP94A	ES951	ESP95A
a) to improve your knowledge of English and above all your proficiency & confidence in using it	85.7%	79.0%	88.0%	54.0%
b) to improve your understanding of language teaching and language learning theories and findings and their implications for the classroom	95.2%	75.0%	80.0%	85.0%

c) to provide you with some understanding and experience of curriculum planning and renewal	81.0%	86.0%	64.0%	77.0%
d) to extend your repertoire of language teaching approaches and techniques	90.5%	/	92.0%	92.0%
e) to provide you with strategies to observe and evaluate classroom procedures, and to provide you with some experience of undertaking explorations and developments designed to bring about improvements to your own classroom practice	85.7%	/	92.0%	/
f) to enable you to develop a reflective stance in teaching	90.5%	/	100%	/
g) to enhance your knowledge of how to manage an English Department and perform other duties of an English panel chairperson	/	83.0%	/	93.0%

An average of 80.4% of the participants on the four courses considered course aims and objectives to be useful to their work on return to school.

III. Usefulness and Relevance of Individual Course Components

Course components	ES 942		ESP 94A		ES 951		ESP 95A	
	T1	T2	T1	T2	T1	T2	T1	T2
1. Language Improvement	50.0%	71.4%	/	/	76.8%	84.0%	/	/
2.Reflection on Present Practice	46.9%	57.1%	/	/	59.6%	68.0%	66.7%	77.0%
3. Language & Education in Hong Kong	31.3%	38.1%	84.6%	83.0%	28.3%	28.0%	44.4%	39.0%
4. Learning through Language	45.2%	80.9%	75.1%	69.0%	65.7%	72.0%	77.8%	77.0%
5. Teaching for Learning	64.5%	76.2%	42.3%	34.0%	74.7%	84.0%	72.2%	77.0%
6. School-based Work Phase 1	16.2%	66.7%	/	/	59.6%	76.0%	/	/
Phase 2	53.1%	76.2%	/	/	81.8%	88.0%	/	/
Phase 3	54.8%	71.4%	/	/	44.4%	72.0%	/	/

Phase 4	31.3% 47.6%	/ /	/ /	/ /
7. The English Language System	64.5% 76.2%	42.3% 34.0%	74.7% 84.0%	72.2% 77.0%
8. Departmental Management	/ /	63.5% 79.0%	/ /	77.8% 77.0%
9. Project Work	/ /	53.8% 52.0%	/ /	66.7% 53.0%

Course components which were considered useful and relevant at T2 by the majority of the participants' (ie. over 70%) include:

Departmental Management (average: 78%)

Language Improvement (average: 77.7%)

Learning Through Language (average: 74.7%)

- Promoting Learner Independence
- Coping With Mixed Ability Classess
- ELT Approaches
- Task-based Learning
- Classroom Interaction

School-based Work (average: 71.1%)

IV. Changes in the participants' teaching as a result of the courses they had attended

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